

Message Text

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SUBJECT: QUEBEC STEELWORKERS CONVENTION FEATURES BLAST AT
MARXISTS IN PROVINCE'S LABOR MOVEMENT AND VISIT BY PREMIER
LEVESQUE

1. SUMMARY: SPEAKING TO DELEGATES GATHERED AT 12TH ANNUAL
CONVENTION OF QUEBEC WING OF UNITED STEELWORKERS OF AMERICA,
UNION PRESIDENT JEAN GERIN-LAJOIE TERMED VICTORY OF PARTI
QUEBECOIS IN NOV 15 QUEBEC GENERAL ELECTION A VITAL STEP IN
QUEBEC HISTORY WHICH HAD GIVEN WORKERS AN IMPORTANT TOOL IN
ACHIEVING DEMOCRACY IN THE PROVINCE. HE EXPRESSED HIS CONCERN
OVER RECENT GOVT. AND MEDIA ATTACKS ON LABOR MOVEMENT BUT
CONCENTRATED HIS FIRE ON INTERNAL LABOR SQUABBLING, WHICH HE
DESCRIBED AS PARTICULARLY DANGEROUS TO HEALTH OF TRADE UNIONISM
IN PROVINCE. LARGELY TO BLAME FOR THIS INTERNAL DISCORD,
ACCORDING TO GERIN-LAJOIE, ARE MARCEL PEPIN, YVON CHARBONNEAU
AND FELLOW "MARXIST THEORISTS" OF THE CONFEDERATION OF NATIONAL
TRADE UNIONS (CNTU) AND THE QUEBEC TEACHERS' FEDERATION
(CEQ). HIGHLIGHT OF CONVENTION WAS VISIT OF PREMIER LEVESQUE
WHO DISCUSSED HIS GOVERNMENT'S LABOR PRIORITIES. END SUMMARY.

2. SOME 200 DELEGATES REPRESENTING 45,000 QUEBEC STEELWORKERS
GATHERED IN NORTHERN IRON ORE MINING COMMUNITY OF FERMONT
ON QUEBEC-LABRADOR BORDER TO HEAR UNION PRESIDENT JEAN GERIN-
LAJOIE DELIVER A REPORT IN WHICH HE REJOICED IN RECENT ELECTORAL
VICTORY OF PARTI QUEBECOIS. REFERRING TO A STATEMENT HE HAD
MADE EARLIER IN TELEVISION INTERVIEW, GERIN-LAJOIE SAID HE
UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

PAGE 02 QUEBEC 00384 132026Z

FELT PQ VICTORY MEANT WORKERS WOULD GAIN MORE POWER. HE

EXPLAINED THIS BY SAYING THAT: (1) WORKERS HAD VOTED MASSIVELY IN FAVOR OF PQ; (2) PQ WAS PARTY WHICH BELONGED TO ITS MEMBERS AND WAS NOT ATTACHED TO ANY OUTSIDE FORCE; AND (3) SOCIAL-DEMOCRATIC IDEOLOGY OF PQ WAS AIMED AT GIVING POWER TO WORKERS IN ORDER CONSTRUCT A MORE DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY. IN CONTRAST TO SOME OBSERVERS, GERIN-LAJOIE ADDED THAT, IN HIS VIEW, QUEBEC WORKERS HAD VOTED NOT ONLY AGAINST BOURASSA AND LIBERALS, BUT FOR "PROMISED SOCIETY" OF PQ.

3. GERIN-LAJOIE DEVOTED MAJOR PORTION OF HIS REPORT TO WARNING UNION MOVEMENT OF THREATS IT WAS FACING BOTH FROM WITHOUT AND WITHIN. EXTERNAL ATTACKS (WHICH GERIN-LAJOIE SAID CAME FROM PROVINCIAL AND FEDERAL LIBERALS, I.E. BOURASSA AND TRUDEAU) HAVE SO TURNED PUBLIC OPINION AGAINST UNIONS THAT, ACCORDING GERIN-LAJOIE, NDP ON FEDERAL LEVEL AND PQ ON PROVINCIAL LEVEL HAVE BEEN FORCED TO ADOPT STANDS AT ODDS WITH WORKERS ON MANY ISSUES TO AVOID ALIENATING PUBLIC. MUCH MORE SERIOUS HOWEVER, WARNED GERIN-LAJOIE, ARE INTERNAL DIVISIONS WITHIN QUEBEC LABOR MOVEMENT - ESPECIALLY THOSE OVER IDEOLOGY. POINTING THE FINGER AT FORMER CNTU PRESIDENT MARCEL PEPIN AND CEQ PRESIDENT YVON CHARBONNEAU, GERIN-LAJOIE BERATED UNION ELEMENTS WHO SIMPLISTICALLY REDUCED TRADE UNIONISM TO ONE OF TWO CATEGORIES: "BUSINESS UNIONISM" OR UNIONISM OF COMBAT OR CLASS STRUGGLE. HE CALLED UPON UNIONS TO STOP RESORTING TO MARXIST RHETORIC AND TO RECOGNIZE THE DIVERSITY OF THE WORKING CLASS. HE ARGUED THAT MARXISM COMMITS A "GRAVE ERROR" IN UNDERMINING THE STATE AND DESTROYING FAITH IN THE POLITICAL SYSTEM. HE ADDED THAT THE ADHERENTS OF MARXISM CONDEMNED ALL THOSE WHO DID NOT RALLY TO THE FORMATION OF A WORKERS' PARTY AS PRACTISING "BUSINESS UNIONISM". THESE INCLUDED TRADE UNIONISTS WHO SEEK WORKER BENEFITS, LABOR, OR POLITICAL REFORM AS WELL AS PARTISANS OF SOCIAL DEMOCRACY OR THE PARTI QUEBECOIS. GERIN-LAJOIE POINTED OUT THAT NEITHER THE CNTU NOR THE CEQ SUPPORTED THE PQ IN THE RECENT ELECTION BECAUSE, HE SAID, IN SPITE OF PQ'S INTENT TO CARRY OUT REFORMS FAVORABLE TO THE WORKERS, IT WAS NOT A PARTY DEDICATED SOLELY TO "POWER OF THE WORKING CLASS." GERIN-LAJOIE QUOTED A CNTU SPOKESMAN WHO REPORTEDLY SAID PRIOR TO ELECTION: "WE ARE FACED WITH VARIOUS BOURGEOIS PARTIES, NONE CONTROLLED BY THE WORKERS."

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PAGE 03 QUEBEC 00384 132026Z

4. HIGHLIGHT OF STEELWORKERS' CONVENTION WAS APPEARANCE BY QUEBEC PREMIER RENE LEVESQUE. DESCRIBING PRIORITIES OF HIS GOVT IN AREA OF LABOR, LEVESQUE SAID PQ WOULD STRESS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, BUT EMPHASIZE ABOVE ALL RESPECT FOR HEALTH AND SAFETY OF WORKERS. RESPONDING TO A QUESTION ON THE FUTURE OF INTERNATIONAL UNIONS IN QUEBEC, LEVESQUE CAREFULLY STATED HE THOUGHT THAT UNIONS IN QUEBEC, INCLUDING STEELWORKERS,

SHOULD BE QUEBECOIS. HE REFUSED, HOWEVER, TO RULE OUT AFFILIATIONS OR "COMMON FRONTS" WITH OTHER UNIONS, INCLUDING INTERNATIONALS.

5. COMMENT: TRADE UNIONISM IN QUEBEC IS FAR FROM BEING THE POWERFUL MONOLITH SOME OF ITS LEADERS - OFTEN ABETTED BY SUPERFICIAL MEDIA COMMENT - WOULD LIKE TO PORTRAY, AND STATEMENTS BY LABOR LEADERS LIKE GERIN-LAJOIE SERVE AS USEFUL REMINDERS OF THIS. CONSIDERED A RELATIVE MODERATE AND A REALIST IN THE PROVINCE'S LABOR FIELD, GERIN-LAJOIE SEES RADICAL POLICIES OF LEADERS LIKE CNTU'S MARCEL PEPIN AND CEQ'S YVON CHARBONNEAU AS GREATEST DANGER THREATENING QUEBEC LABOR MOVEMENT. GIVEN FACT THAT GERIN-LAJOIE IS ALSO A VICE-PRESIDENT OF QFL, SUCH AN ATTITUDE CAN BE EXPECTED. STRONG RIVALRIES EXIST BETWEEN TOUGH, PRAGMATIC NORTH AMERICAN UNIONISTS WITHIN QFL AND RADICAL IDEOLOGISTS OF CNTU AND CEQ.

MANY OBSERVERS IN QUEBEC SEE A GAP FORMING IN QUEBEC LABOR MOVEMENT - BETWEEN THOSE WHO CHOSE TO PRACTICE IDEOLOGY AND THOSE WHO PRACTICE "BUSINESS UNIONISM" OR THE TRADITIONAL NORTH AMERICAN SEARCH FOR A BIGGER SLICE OF THE ECONOMIC PIE. IF REALIGNMENT EVER OCCURS IN QUEBEC ORGANIZED LABOR, THESE SAME OBSERVERS PREDICT GROUPING OF CNTU, CEQ AND PROGRESSIVE ELEMENTS OF QFL INTO A UNION CENTRAL WITH IDEOLOGICAL LEANINGS AND POSSIBLE GOAL OF FORMING WORKERS' PARTY IN PROVINCE. ON THE OTHER HAND, THEY SEE A LINKING OF THE MAJORITY OF QFL MEMBERS, THE CENTRALE DES SYNDICATS DEMOCRATIQUES (QUEBEC'S FOURTH UNION CENTRAL - FORMED IN SPLIT WITH CNTU IN 1972), AND SEVERAL INDEPENDENTS INTO A CENTRAL WHICH WOULD TEND TO DO BATTLE MORE IN THE ECONOMIC FIELD AND NOT SEEK TO PLACE ITSELF OUTSIDE PRESENT POLITICAL SYSTEM. GERIN-LAJOIE BELIEVES SUCH A DESCRIPTION OF QUEBEC TRADE UNIONISM CONSISTING OF TWO RIVAL CAMPS IS "SIMPLISTIC AND UNREALISTIC." YET EVEN HIS WARNING DEMONSTRATES THAT TWO GROUPS ARE GROWING FURTHER

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PAGE 04 QUEBEC 00384 132026Z

APART IN ORIENTATION, ALTHOUGH THEY ARE STILL ABLE TO WORK TOGETHER WHEN THEIR OBJECTIVES COINCIDE.

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